DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 520 FL 014 221

AUTHOR Millstone, A.
TITLE Oral Proficiency Testing and Programs at the University of South Carolina.
PUB DATE Dec 83
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (100th, New York, NY, December 27-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Administration Education; College Faculty; College Second Language Programs; Communicative Competence (Languages); *Competency Based Education; Cooperative Programs; Degree Requirements; Departments; *Faculty Development; French; German; Higher Education; International Education; Internship Programs; Interviews; *Language Proficiency; Language Tests; Professional Associations; Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction; Spanish; *Testing; Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *Foreign Service Institute Interview

ABSTRACT

Workshops on proficiency testing attended by foreign language faculty at the University of South Carolina provided the starting point for extradepartmental involvement in proficiency testing. As a result of funding requirements and a cooperative arrangement between the foreign languages department and the Masters in International Business program (MIBS), faculty in French and Spanish received training in, and derived very different applications of, proficiency testing. The French faculty approach has been to establish the oral proficiency interview as a degree requirement, with the curriculum developed to prepare students for it. Some problems have resulted from student anxiety over the interview as a hurdle to be overcome late in their program, but more time is thought necessary to evaluate it. The Spanish faculty has made curricular changes designed to develop proficiency and has created an additional series of proficiency-based intensive courses using oral proficiency interviews as an integral feature. Problems foreseen in global application of proficiency testing in the foreign language curriculum include misunderstandings of what proficiency means and developing a single proficiency standard for all students. At the University of South Carolina, language proficiency testing has also been used to place students and predict their success in an international business internship program. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED239520

ORAL PROFICIENCY TESTING AND PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Since the Fall of 1980, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of South Carolina has been actively involved in workshops to train its faculty in techniques of oral proficiency interviewing and rating. The impact of such training has been felt inside and outside the Department. Within, we have improved the caliber of the language programs involved and have generated new courses to meet the needs of both our students and the professional community in our area. At the same time, colleagues in other departments and colleges of the university have expressed renewed interest in language training as components of their programs, and university administrators have been appreciative and supportive of our efforts to maintain and improve the quality of instruction.

Trained Personnel

To date, nine people from my department have attended oral proficiency workshops. This figure represents 20% of our language faculty, making USC the national leader in trained faculty testers and raters of oral proficiency.

The first team from USC -- in French and Spanish -- was invited to participate in a workshop sponsored by the Foreign Service Institute in Washington. In the course of this five-day workshop -- the second of its kind to involve university language specialists -- the participants were trained to administer and rate FSI Oral Proficiency Interviews, were themselves rated by FSI personnel, and were asked to provide feedback about the method.

A year and a half later, in the Spring of 1982, ETS in conjunction with

FL014221

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Millstone

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ACTFL, sponsored its first oral proficiency workshop. The purpose of this five-day workshop was to train college and university professors of French and Spanish in a method of proficiency testing and rating based on the FSI Oral Proficiency Interview but tailored to academic needs. Two of us -- one in French, one in Spanish -- were selected to attend. That summer, two more people -- again, one in French, one in Spanish -- were invited to a two-day ETS/ACTFL "familiarization" workshop to acquaint them with the principles of proficiency testing and rating. In the Spring of 1983, ETS/ACTFL sponsored another five-day tester-training workshop, this time in German and Italian, which three colleagues attended. Finally, that same Spring, one of our ETS-trained colleagues (in Spanish) participated in the first ETS trainer workshop, to qualify him to train other teachers to administer and rate oral proficiency interviews.

Funding

A major indication of interest in proficiency testing at USC derives from the pattern of funding we have received for participation in these workshops. From the first team, one person was sponsored by FSI, and the other received a stipend from the Department. For the second and subsequent teams, however, it was imperative that other sources be located. Even though ACTFL provided travel to and from the workshop sites, per diem expenses for faculty attending workshops would have strained the Departmental travel budget. More importantly, ACTFL stipulated that preference for workshop participants would be given to those with institutional, ie. extra-departmental support.

For this reason, the chairman of the Foreign Language Department approached the Director of the Masters in International Business Program (MIBS). Given the integral role of the Foreign Language Department in this program -- which I will discuss shortly -- the MIBS director agreed to

provide per diem expenses under two conditions: 1) the faculty member is currently involved in instruction in the program, either in the summer intensive or in the year maintenance/business language course and 2) the faculty member agrees to administer the exam to MIBS students for at least five years. To date, MIBS has provided financial support to all the French, Spanish and German faculty who have attended ETS proficiency workshops. The Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences has provided stipends for the two Italian professors because Italian is not one of the languages of the MIBS program. More importantly, the Dean specifically stated in a memo to my chairman that "the Department should not have to support from its limited travel funds the travel expenses of faculty members attending these workshops..." Such examples of financial support are ample proof that the University considers proficiency testing a priority item.

Departmental Applications of the Proficiency Concept

The Foreign Language Department has made use of oral proficiency training in a variety of ways to strengthen the curriculum. However, given our internal administrative separation into distinct language divisions, the Department as a University unit has not adopted a standard policy regarding proficiency testing. Rather, the French and the Spanish -- the two major languages with the largest number of trained testers -- have generated radically different applications of the concept of proficiency to their programs. At the same time, however, the option selected by one does not by any means preclude interest by the other to follow the same tack: after all, proficiency testing is still a fairly recent development in our department and in university language programs in general. Nor do I mention ideas being considered by German and Italian since those faculty members received their training within the past year and have not had time to

implement any systematic changes in their programs. Despite the differences with which oral proficiency is currently viewed in my Department, I foresee that within five years we will have a departmental policy and practice.

The French approach has focused primarily on the Oral Proficiency Interview as a degree requirement. The interview is now an exit requirement for undergraduate French majors and is a pre-teaching intern-ship requirement for French education majors and MAT candidates. In each case, students must attain an ETS rating of "advanced" or an FSI rating of 2.

In order to "prepare" our students for the interview, we have systematically incorporated ETS/FSI-type role playing situations into our conversation classes. At the same time, we are shifting the basis of student evaluation from strictly achievement-oriented learning (memorization of vocabulary lists, for example) to a mixture of achievement and proficiency criteria (for example, probing the student to see whether he or she can communicate meaning through circumlocution if specific vocabulary is lacking). This approach has resulted in a greater emphasis on comminication within the universe of language as distinct from mere manipulation of patterns and vocabulary. Students have become more creative and spontaneous with the language and are more self-confident about their ability to speak. At the same time, however, we do not assign grade values according to levels of proficiency.

Use of the OPI in the French program has generated a certain amount of anxiety among our students. For many, the interview represents an unfair last hurdle to overcome, and a series of "proficiency myths" are making the rounds. We have also not systematically reviewed our curriculum at all levels to lead students toward the stated proficiency goal. There is a positive aspect to this pressure and uncertainty, however. Students are

more aware of the importance of developing their speaking skills and have been more diligent about going to French movies, attending French Table, participating in French Club and other French-related activities. It occurs to me that the French approach is consistent with a long French tradition of dictating standards to the masses from the top, whether that summit be represented by Louis XIV, Paris or a Full Professor. Time alone will tell if the proficiency level we require is a realistic goal or an elitist standard for only a select few.

The Spanish have adopted what I think of as a grass-roots approach to proficiency. Rather than designate a level which its language and education majors are expected to attain, the Spanish have been making curricular changes designed to develop proficiency. In 101 and 102, course objectives are now stated in terms of the proficiency guidelines. Furthermore, at the urging of university administrators, the Spanish have created a series of three proficiency-based intensive language courses. The intensive program parallels the traditional curriculum in that it is a four skills approach. However, greater emphasis is placed on speaking, and oral interviews are an integral feature of the program and a key factor in determining final grades. Admission to the program is by consent of instructors only, and is therefore limited to highly motivated and interested students, many of whom have either previously studied a foreign language or who need to learn a language for professional reasons.

In a report submitted last Spring to the Division of Spanish and Portuguese, the chairman of the Spanish Intensive Courses stated that one of the objectives of this program is "to determine the realistic oral proficiency rating for each level and to state it as part of the course goals." Currently, the means of achieving this objective is in a formative

stage: instructors have been tallying ratings of students from each of these classes to determine the proficiency level of the majority; in the near future, these results will be compared with ratings of students in corresponding traditional courses.

There are obvious potential problems associated with this approach. The principal one is the idea of formulating a proficiency goal for each course and using this goal as the standard by which all students are measured. Due to misunderstandings about what proficiency means, various colleagues were suggesting that students in the first course should attain a rating of 1 (FSI) or intermediate-high (ETS), that in the second course they should progress to 2 (FSI) or advanced (ETS) and that, in the third semester they would get to 3 (FSI) or superior (ETS). Since this initial confusion, however, there have been several presentations to the faculty, both about proficiency testing and about the intensive program. At the same time, we realize that, as in French, the Spanish approach is in an early stage, but we have been encouraged by positive student response to the program. New features are being considered, moreover, to make the program better suited to professional needs by focusing on specific career areas as the basis for role-playing and vocabulary learning situations. The program can also be considered a success in that it offers a unique opportunity to teachers to be creative in their approach to language teaching. As a footnote, I would add that, as of this writing, both the German and the French Divisions will offer an intensive course in the Fall of 1984, but neither course will be a mere duplication of the Spanish intensive.

Oral Proficiency Goals in non-Departmental Programs

Since the 1979 President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies, educators throughout the nation have begun to reassess the role of foreign language study in their curricula. At USC,

however, there is a long tradition of foreign language as an integral feature of academic programs, and hence many colleagues outside of the Department have responded positively to our involvement in proficiency testing.

The best example of integration of foreign language study in an outside curriculum is the Masters in International Business Program (MIBS). Now in its ninth year, MIBS is the largest graduate program in international business at any business school accredited by the American Association for Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Developed in response to the needs of multinational business, MIBS is founded on four principles: 1) The successful international manager must have a graduate degree in business. The course of study must include both fundamental topics and advanced work in areas of concern to multinational enterprises; 2) The international business executive must have the ability to communicate in at least one language other than his or her own, and must have the ability to learn additional languages quickly as needed; 3) The international business executive must be attuned to the cultural differences which exist around the world and their impact on how business is done and 4) The international business executive must have the experience of living and working in a foreign country to develop his or her special skills.

The MIBS program incorporates each of these objectives in a program of study lasting two years. Due to the emphasis placed on language acquisition and on cultural sensitivity as key factors of success in the six-month foreign internship, students must prove competence in their language area in order to continue in the business segment of the program. For this reason, students spend the first summer in a ten-week intensive language program in one of six languages: French, Spanish, Portuguese. German, Arabic or

Japanese. During the year, business courses make up the core curriculum, but language study continues in the form of business language courses. In the Spring, the MIBS Director consults language faculty about the competence of each student in order to make proper internship assignments.

Proficiency testing has been a key factor in predicting student success in the internship. Students are tested twice: at the end of the summer intensive and at the end of the internship when they return to the University. The first rating is used as one of the criteria for placement in internships. By the end of the ten-week intensive, students are expected to have attained a proficiency level of advanced (ETS) or 2 (FSI), because this is the level at which a person is defined as capable of performing routine job duties. The second interview is for feedback purposes to measure progress in proficiency of each student. In the near future, students will also have the option of receiving an official rating for job resumes.

In addition to MIBS, the Department of Government and International Studies (GINT) has expressed the desire to add an oral proficiency requirement for their majors and graduate students. Such a development would have a positive effect on my Department in terms of increasing enrollment in language courses. At the same time, there is discussion of developing new courses to be offered in a foreign language by professors in other departments (for example, a course on the French Revolution would be taught <u>in French</u> by a History professor). This trend could have the widest impact on acquisition of language skills.

As proficiency concepts become universally recognized and understood, we need to develop curriculum guidelines that will reflect progress in a language according to proficiency rather than achievement. The Profession has responded enthusiastically to this new trend, moreover, as witnessed by

the number of special workshops and conferences devoted to proficiency techniques and programs.